
Thomas Messenger
Royal Scottish Academy of Music

Follow this and additional works at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl

Recommended Citation
Available at: https://scholarcommons.sc.edu/ssl/vol4/iss3/11
STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

They have not begun to have it on any scale proportionate to their deserving. MacDiarmid is surely one of the most uneven poets who have ever written; I cannot read his didactic poems, which you would think had been written in the Victorian period, except that the references are to Stalin rather than to God. But also he has written superbly intellectual poems, and lines of pathos, humor, delicate lyricism. If he had been English—which is impossible—what honors would have been heaped on his head!

Duncan Glen's book is an introduction to the subject, and should prove useful to the man who will some day write the definitive life. A Scottish Boswell.

LOUIS SIMPSON

UNIVERSITY OF CALIFORNIA, BERKELEY


The number and variety of specialist fields necessarily represented in a study of the Traditional and National Music of Scotland is such that it is hardly surprising that Mr. Collinson's book is the first to attempt such a survey. Let it be said at the outset, therefore, that the musical and non-musical historian, the ethnomusicologist and the scholars in such fields as Celtic studies and Lowland Scots poetry and music will all be somewhat dissatisfied with portions of this book. But the accumulation of a good deal of information and copious musical examples and references in this broad subject was a task well worth tackling, and one in which Mr. Collinson, with his practical experience as a Scots folk-song collector, had much to offer: indeed, very many of the interesting music examples which are the most valuable contribution to this volume, are of the author's own collecting and are now published for the first time.

By "traditional" Mr. Collinson means music which is transmitted aurally and hence includes instrumental as well as vocal music. The term "national," on the other hand, he applies to music "composed, or
REVIEW

'patched'... expressly for publication" but excluding Art Songs (his term) such as those of Francis George Scott and, of course, Scotch church music—though he does devote a short but intriguing chapter to the Gaelic Long Tunes for Psalms, a folk embellishment of the Scottish psalm tunes of the Reformation period.


The more extensive portions are those treating the vocal music of the Gaels and the Lowlanders and the two most informative chapters on the pipes and their music. The latter contain the kind of description and discussion of such matters as form, specific melodic and rhythmic functions, speed, character, ornamentation and manner of performance that one would have welcomed elsewhere. The first chapter does deal with general characteristics of Scots song in all traditions (its scales and modes, its snap rhythms and one or two other thumbprints), but one would have cheerfully relegated some of the discussion of sources and other background information in the following chapters to an appendix, to have in their place a more specific study of the music and some assessment of its relative merits and demerits within separate or overlapping traditions.

Paradoxically, the main weakness of this broad survey is that it is too narrow; it lacks too frequently a healthy historical perspective in the one subject that Mr. Collinson continually asserts to be his main concern—music.

In discussing the ancient notation of the pipes Mr. Collinson says:

The writer has twice come across the tradition that the idea of sol-fa notation came to its inventor through this ancient pipe notation. The late pipe-major William MacLean told the writer of a tradition of a lady unnamed who had learned of and heard the canntaireachd from the last of the MacCrimmon pipers while on a visit to Skye, and from it had helped to evolve the tonic sol-fa system. The system was perfected and developed by John Curwen, founder of the present firm of music publishers of that name, from the idea of the daughter of a Norwich clergyman, Miss Sarah Ann Glover (1785-1867). It would be interesting to know if it could have been this Miss Glover who was the lady of the above tradi-

[ 237 ]
STUDIES IN SCOTTISH LITERATURE

... and if she was ever in Skye. It is an acknowledged fact that the sol-fa system seems to come naturally to the Scottish Highlander, and is the one almost in sole use for choir training throughout the Highlands. (pp. 189-190n)

Although the sol-fa system was "perfected and developed by John Curwen" its principles had been in use since medieval times: the names used for the notes of the scale remain essentially those adopted by Guido d'Arezzo as early as the 11th century.

The fact too that many of the Scottish folk tunes are in the modes of medieval and Renaissance music and hence probably date from these periods, together with the fact that many of these same tunes show other influences from Latin plainsong, should not be surprising. No one could claim that the insularity of we Scots isolated our nation from the most powerful musical influence of medieval times, namely, the liturgical chants of the church; these were the mainstay of medieval church music in Scotland as elsewhere, and would be known by the people.

Yet Mr. Collinson often seems quite surprised to find modal and other ecclesiastical influences. In discussing the Ossianic ballads he says:

As far as our study is concerned, there can be little doubt that some of these ballads as still sung in the Highlands of Scotland, were composed as early as the twelfth century. It is instinctive in the Gael to use old existing tunes for the composition of new songs, and however old the ballads are, some of their tunes are probably older still. Some of the Ossianic ballad tunes have a remarkable resemblance to ecclesiastical chant, as we shall see in a moment. (p. 39)

And later:

It is remarkable how many features in these tunes correspond to Latin plainsong. Firstly there is the reciting note on a monotone; secondly, the approach to this. . . . (p. 44)

He lists four resemblances.

And in the chapter on "The Native Idiom," the scales first treated are the "gapped" ones, the five-note or pentatonic scale and the six-note or hexatonic scale. The author then proceeds as follows:

The next step in the evolution of the Scottish musical scales is, logically, to fill in the remaining gap in the six-note scale (or what comes to the same thing, both gaps in the pentatonic scale) with an intermediate note. (pp. 10-11)

And after some technical illustration he adds:

These seven scales, formed by the successive inversions of the
REVIEWS

Major scale, will be found to correspond in the sequence of their intervals to the seven 'Church' or 'Ecclesiastical' Modes. This is a fact the more remarkable in that the correspondence seems to be fortuitous, for the Church Modes have other theories for the process of their formation (too abstruse to be discussed here).

(p. 11)

Mr. Collinson's first step should surely have been to describe the basic Church Modes as a natural and expected background, with or without a reference to their probable origins in the Ancient World. He could, thereafter, have described the "gapped" scales.

The lack of perspective which these quotations reveal could be very misleading to the reader who does not already possess a wide knowledge of music history.

The author concludes one part of his text by emphasising that the songs he has discussed "are not something extracted from old manuscripts; they are still sung in Scotland today." The emphasis on traditional music as a colourful, living art—one which Mr. Collinson is doing much to perpetuate—is a most commendable and attractive feature of this book, even if this particular antithesis seems parochial in the face of so much other fine music which has been reborn (and is very much alive) through extraction "from old manuscripts."

THOMAS MESSENGER
ROYAL SCOTTISH ACADEMY OF MUSIC


J. F. and T. M. Flett have made painstaking research with obvious enthusiasm for their Traditional Dancing in Scotland. It is a well produced book describing the social dancing activities of the Scottish people prior to 1914 with brief references to later years for purposes of comparison.

In the lively pictures they conjure up of weddings, ceilidhs and travelling dancing masters, a light-hearted side of the Scottish character